UNIVERSITY OF LONDON
LIBRARY

THE END OF PHILOSOPHY: MARX AND WITTGENSTEIN

AN INAUGURAL LECTURE

Delivered at the University
1st May, 1973

by

A. R. MANSER, M.A., B.Phil.
Professor of Philosophy

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

~~1973~~
BIBL.
LONDIN.
UNIV.

© A. R. MANSER, 1973

85432 102 0

361623

Printed in Great Britain by
The Camelot Press Ltd., Southampton,
for the University of Southampton

THE END OF PHILOSOPHY: MARX AND WITTGENSTEIN

NO doubt as he comes to write his inaugural lecture every professor feels that there is some special problem in introducing himself to his new colleagues. Mine is that although I am a new professor, I am by no means a new member of this University, having taught here for much longer than most of those who make up my audience. Indeed, there are only fifty-one academics whose appointments predate my own. Hence I cannot feel that this audience is here to make my acquaintance or to learn my views. Whatever their motives in coming, I am, like any academic, grateful for a captive group before whom I can ride my hobby-horses unconstrained by any syllabus.

The length of my stay in this University creates a special problem in paying tribute to my predecessor, the late Professor MacIver, under whom I taught for twenty years. He created the department of philosophy here, arriving as the first full-time teacher of the subject that the then University College appointed. When he retired there was a flourishing department of six with a good reputation, and philosophy was being taught to a substantial number of students. I am lucky to have inherited such a happy and able department. My only point of criticism applies to the University, not to the department. Five or six years ago the number of staff was average for the country; now we are small for a philosophy department, not just in proportion to the size of the University but absolutely. Clearly one of my urgent tasks, in spite of restrictions on growth, is to increase our numbers.

Any tribute of mine to Arthur MacIver is bound to be partly autobiographical, for my personal debt to him is immense. I arrived here as a callow Oxford graduate, convinced that only there was true philosophy to be found; he showed me how much more there was to the subject than I had been taught. His willingness to discuss any philosophical problem, to comment in detail on draft papers whilst refusing any published acknowledgement of his assistance, his wide-ranging knowledge of philosophy, all these affected my own view of philosophy deeply. Even though in recent years our philosophical views differed, mine today would not be what they are without his considerable influence.

During his time at Southampton his main philosophical effort went into his lectures, which were highly appreciated by the better students. Partly because of the energy he spent on these, but also partly because

his own high standards led him to be dissatisfied with his own writing, he published little during this period. This was a pity, for he wrote well and was always worth reading.

He was not a popular figure in the University; many found his behaviour eccentric. His reluctance to deal with business matters drove administrators frantic; his pointed remarks made many enemies. At the end of a public lecture by the then Dean of Winchester advocating a theology department, MacIver said in a whisper audible for several rows: 'He has shown that theology is an academic discipline, and a damned bad one too.' A university which had more confidence in itself, which really believed in academic values, would have had less difficulty in appreciating a man whose dedication to his subject was the reason for his failure to conform. Those who did not see his value to Southampton perhaps reveal more of their own shortcomings than of his.

Part of the difficulty that many academics found with MacIver was due not to his character so much as to his being a philosopher, for they are always worrying people to have in a community. They are wont to ask questions which seem to demolish the basis of a person's whole subject. It should not be forgotten how the Athenians at the dawn of philosophy found Socrates' questioning intolerable. The offence becomes perhaps greater when it is realised that this is not just a quirk of the individual questioner but part of the essence of the subject. For whatever else philosophy may be, it certainly involves constant questioning of all that is normally taken for granted, whether it be the existence of the external world or the value of a present-day university education.

However, if philosophy confined itself to challenging others' ideas, to dealing with problems that arose in other disciplines, it would be an arrogant subject, which indeed it often seems to be to those on the outside. It also, and necessarily if it is to be really questioning, finds its own existence its greatest problem. The mark of modern philosophy, and of any worthy of the name, is self-doubt. My subject tonight is in fact the central paradox of philosophy, and the 'End' in my title refers, in a punning Hegelian fashion, both to the aim and to the abolition or cessation of philosophy. For reasons which will become clear in the course of this lecture this end is not likely to occur in the near future and I feel little fear of presiding over the disappearance of my subject during the tenure of the chair. For if it is wished to bring philosophy to an end this has to be done by philosophising; it is a series of philosophical arguments which are required to show that there is no more need of the subject. There are those who decide to ignore philosophy and its problems, who pride themselves on being 'practical' men. But these are

most often in the grip of outworn philosophical theories and unaware of their being so. Only philosophising can bring peace to a philosopher.

It is sometimes thought that Marx suggested another way of getting rid of philosophy, in the XIth Thesis on Feuerbach:

> Philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways: the point, however, is to *change* it.

But this, like so many of Marx's epigrams, can be given a variety of meanings. If it were merely an expression of impatience with word-spinners and hair-splitters there would be little point in paying attention to it. In fact the XI Theses are the condensation of a great deal of philosophical thinking by Marx, and can only be understood in that context. It is because of the philosophical views that he had come to hold about philosophy that Marx could propound such a view. He was not thinking of a society in which no one was given the chance to philosophise.

If philosophy is to be brought to an end, to be abolished, then its problems, those that have worried generations of philosophers, must not merely be ignored nor even simply solved. For a solution implies the possibility of more of the same kind; as in science the solution itself gives rise to further problems which must be solved in their turn. Some past philosophers have regarded their subject in this way, as a kind of super-science and so susceptible of the same kind of treatment. For the abolition of philosophy there is required a method for the 'dissolution' of its problems, that is for an argument which shows they need never have arisen in the first place, that they rested on some kind of fundamental mistake. Marx thought he had found such a mistake, as also did Wittgenstein. Tonight I want to compare their views on this.

The feeling that philosophy has been brought to an end is an exhilarating one; I well remember experiencing it with a group of fellow-students. We believed that all its problems had been 'dissolved' and that there was nothing left to discuss. We had not used the technique on all of the traditional problems, but we were convinced that these would soon succumb, that there was nothing more to be said.

The consequence of such a dissolution of problems is that there is (or should be) no such subject as philosophy. Wittgenstein, in the only work published in his life-time, the *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus*, firmly embraced this conclusion:

> The right method of philosophy would be this. To say nothing except what can be said, i.e. the propositions of natural science, i.e. something that has nothing to do with philosophy: and then always,

> when someone else wished to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he had given no meaning to certain signs in his propositions. This method would be unsatisfying to the other—he would not have the feeling that we were teaching him philosophy—but it would be the only strictly correct method.[1]

So convinced was Wittgenstein of the success of his 'dissolution' of the subject that he was able to give up philosophy for several years, for there was nothing more to be done in the field. However, it must be added that he did not think this was of such great importance; in the preface to the *Tractatus* he says:

> And if I am not mistaken in this, then the value of this work secondly consists in the fact that it shows how little has been done when these (philosophical) problems have been solved.

However, in philosophy bare conclusions are of no use, though they well may be in other intellectual disciplines. For in these latter the conclusion can be detached from the premisses without affecting it. If I need to know the refractive index of this substance, a figure is all that I require, the method whereby it was determined is irrelevant. In most cases a scientist's results can stand on their own. In philosophy, on the other hand, the conclusion can only be fully understood by following the arguments leading to it, which are what give it its significance. That is why philosophy cannot be presented in summary form or learnt from a text-book. For this reason I am liable to mislead my hearers by trying to compress so much into the space of one lecture.

For Wittgenstein in his first period the misunderstandings which constitute traditional philosophy arose from a failure to appreciate the logic of our language. We can all speak it correctly; in fact:

> All the propositions of everyday language, just as they stand, are in perfect logical order.[2]

But the ability to use language need not imply an understanding of the way it works, of its 'logic'. For the function of language is to picture or represent the world, but this picturing cannot itself be pictured in language, though the use of language 'shows' it. The attempt to express how language pictures the world results in nonsense. Hence all philosophical argument, including the text of the *Tractatus* itself, is strictly nonsensical:

> My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognises them as nonsensical. . . . Whereof we cannot speak, thereof we must remain silent.[3]

It should be noted that Wittegnstein's arguments apply to language as such, not just to a particular language; there is no possibility of constructing a new one for expressing what is inexpressible in our own. This is ruled out by logical considerations.

Wittgenstein's argument could be put in the form:

> When reality is depicted, philosophy as an independent branch of knowledge loses its medium of existence.[4]

This is from Marx's *German Ideology* of 1845–6, to a philosopher a much more interesting work than the rather confused *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* of 1844. There are surprising similarities between the former work and things said by Wittgenstein. It is not a question of influence, for the *German Ideology* was not published until 1932, having been left by Marx in an attic to the 'gnawing criticism of the mice'. These similarities reveal how a likeness between their respective conceptions of philosophy led to a likeness in argument. Marx also thought he had settled his accounts with philosophy once he had seen that it was an illusion caused by a failure to understand the correct functioning of language. After 1846 he did not write anything that could be called specifically philosophical, though his abandonment of philosophy was not total. There are philosophical arguments in *Capital* and the *Grundrisse* of his later period.

Wittgenstein, on the other hand, returned to Cambridge and involvement with philosophy in 1929. Though there are considerable differences of detail between the works he wrote then and the *Tractatus*, these hardly affect my theme. The end of philosophy is still something to be achieved, though he realised that it could not be disposed of quite so simply as he had once thought. The change could be characterised by saying that in the *Tractatus* he suggested one method of getting rid of all philosophical problems, whereas in the posthumous works he sees that different problems need different treatments. In spite of this he could still say:

> For the clarity which we are aiming at is indeed *complete* clarity. But this simply means that the philosophical problems should *completely* disappear.
>
> The real discovery is the one that makes me capable of stopping doing philosophy when I want to.[5]

The posthumous works also contain thoughts on the origin of philosophical problems; although they have the appearance of depth they arise when our language 'idles' or 'goes on holiday'. No such

difficulties arise, or ought to arise, when we are using it to talk about the world, when it is functioning in the role for which it was constructed. Marx was perhaps making a similar remark when he said:

> Philosophy and the study of the actual world have the same relation to one another as masturbation and sexual love.[6]

Philosophy, or perhaps rather the heir to the subject that used to be called philosophy, is seen by the later Wittgenstein as a battle against 'the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language'[7] but this bewitchment includes the vast majority of previous philosophising, including, as he frequently emphasises, that of the author of the *Tractatus*.

The posthumous works contain a mass of brilliant analyses of particular examples of the way in which language can idle and so give rise to philosophical problems. They provide a rich mine for those who are compelled by the university system to produce 'research results' in the form of published papers. It is ironical that a man who wanted to make philosophical problems 'completely disappear' should have given rise to so much philosophical writing, though perhaps it is inevitable that any great philosopher appears to reveal so much previously undiscovered territory that for those who come immediately after the temptation is to wander there fascinated by the new sights. The danger is that real thought languishes and is replaced by discipleship and exegesis. Wittgenstein himself tried to discourage his pupils from becoming professional philosophers, partly because he thought teaching the subject in a university was incompatible with philosophic integrity, and partly because he did not think there was such a subject left to teach. That the majority of these pupils have continued teaching philosophy and that the publication of his later works has given rise to so much philosophising is perhaps evidence that the problems are not so easily disposed of.

Marx and the early Wittgenstein thought they could see a single cause for that disease of the intellect, philosophy; the later Wittgenstein denied there was any single cause. The problem for all such views is to account for the fact that so many people have for so long argued passionately about these problems. There are those who have claimed that philosophy is merely parasitic, each generation of philosophers providing empty problems for those who come after them. Certainly to students of the subject it must often seem like this, as they are taught the improbable views of one philosopher in order to see how the next refuted him. The whole procedure can seem to depend on the existence

of departments of philosophy, which once established are hard to get rid of. The following quotation from Keith Thomas' book on the decline of magic might apply more widely:

> It would be tempting to explain this long survival of magical practices by pointing out that they helped to provide many professional wizards with a respectable livelihood. The example of the legal profession is a reminder that it is always possible for a substantial social group to support itself by proffering solutions to problems which they themselves have helped to manufacture.[8]

This is not an adequate explanation, for although it may often seem that lawyers live from the confusions they have created, laws are needed in any complex society. And once they exist there inevitably arise problems of interpretation and application which are best dealt with by specialists, though the problems came into being independently of them. Similarly, philosophical problems arise amongst those quite ignorant of academic philosophy, for example in the writings of scientists. And many people are moved to speculate on 'God, freedom and immortality' without the benefit of an academic education. Thinking on such matters is in fact a paradigm of 'deep thoughts', and there is a family likeness between them at most times and places. If such thoughts are the result of language 'going on holiday', it is surely surprising that it should always spend its vacations at the same place. In other words, philosophy appears to deal with a connected set of problems, not a series of isolated ones.

Marx did make an attempt to provide a general explanation of how it was that men were haunted by religious and philosophic notions whose illusory nature he claimed to have established. Indeed, it was Feuerbach's critique of religion that enabled Marx to find an escape route from the philosophy of Hegel. (I am tempted to add that what is now needed is someone to play the role of Marx to Wittgenstein's Feuerbachian one.) The so-called 'Revolution in Philosophy' of the early years of this century enabled philosophers to escape from the stranglehold of British Idealism, but left one problem unanswered. Marx thought the same was true of Feuerbach:

> Owing to the fact that Feuerbach showed the religious world was an illusion of the earthly world—a world which in his writings appears merely as *a phrase*—German theory too was confronted with the question that he left unanswered: how was it that people 'got into their heads' these illusions?[9]

Everyone knows that Marx regarded religion as an error, as the 'opium

of the people'. This did not imply that he thought it trivial or unworthy of attention; few bother to quote him in full about this:

> Religious suffering is at the same time an expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.
>
> The abolition of religion, as the illusory happiness of men, is a demand for their real happiness.[10]

Just as it was no accident that the mass of mankind had been forced to find consolation in religion, it was also not by chance that the intellectuals found refuge in the abstractions of philosophy. But, as in the case of religion, the uncovering of their errors led to the revelation of facts about the conditions which produce these illusions. In this country in recent years it has too often been assumed that philosophical errors were gratuitous in origin, the result of individual bewitchment by language. The search for any general characterisation has been eschewed in favour of a piecemeal approach, and this has often led to an apparent trivialisation of philosophy. It was because he regarded philosophy as important that Marx felt an account of the origin of its errors was necessary. Unfortunately he was often satisfied with a very general reply, a sketch for an explanation rather than an explanation itself. I would like to know why

> . . . German philosophy, because it took consciousness alone as its point of departure, was bound to end in moral philosophy . . .[11]

Marx merely throws this remark out in passing, though he is aware that full explanations were necessary to justify such statements, and elsewhere tries to give them at length. In this he differs from many of his self-styled followers, who try to explain a philosophic movement, such as present-day British philosophy, by saying that the philosphers are the ideologists of capitalism. Marx would have demanded a filling in of this bare schema, some account of why the Idealism of the late nineteenth century was succeeded by 'Linguistic Philosophy' in this century. I am not sure that such an explanation could be given in philosophical terms, though I do not want to rule out the possibility *a priori*. Certainly I cannot accept the view that regards philosophy as a rag-bag of disconnected problems.

It may seem to some of those listening that in comparing Marx and Wittgenstein I am not only being unjust but also ignoring a central philosophical difference. Everyone knows that Wittgenstein was a 'linguistic philosopher', a member of a species that only came into

existence in this century, and this is the vital differentia of his and of most English philosophy of the present. Certainly our way of doing philosophy differs from the way it is pursued in the rest of Europe. In respect of clarity, conciseness and readability ours is obviously superior, though how far this constitutes a philosophic difference I am not clear. Certainly I, and I suspect many of my colleagues, find it hard to say what 'linguistic philosophy' is and how it differs from other varieties. However, I do not have to go into this problem here, partly because it is clear that Wittgenstein in studying language in the way he did was not concerned with linguistics but with something not unlike the 'human mind' and partly because Marx had a not dissimilar view of the role and importance of language:

> *Language* is the immediate actuality of thought. Just as philosophers have given thought an independent existence, so they had to make language into an independent realm. This is the secret of philosophical language, in which thoughts in the form of words have their own content. The problem of descending from the world of thoughts to the actual world is turned into the problem of descending from language to life.[12]

But merely to turn from considering one problematic entity, such as 'thought' or 'mind' to the consideration of another, 'language', does not by itself solve any philosophical problems, let alone dissolve them. It may enable us to see them in a new light, 'break the hold' on us of a certain way of talking. But after a time the same, or very similar, problems arise about this new entity. At its introduction it may be illuminating; when it becomes part of a philosophic orthodoxy it again serves as a barrier. It is for this reason that it has been said that 'Philosophy is a constant battle against new technical terms'. When Wittgenstein said 'Don't ask for the meaning, ask for the use' he was not trying to introduce a new term, but to break the hold of the old one; not propounding a new orthodoxy, but getting rid of a previous one. He did not expect it to be used as a device to prevent thinking. Marx was also scathing in his denunciation of the attempt to find a word which 'as a word' removed philosophical difficulties.[13] There is a sense in which philosophy demands a 'permanent revolution' in its vocabulary.

Both Marx and Wittgenstein agree that there is one great advantage in talking of 'language' rather than of 'thought'. The latter can seem to refer to what is private to the individual, whereas to talk of language is to talk of what is essentially public. Important sections of the *Philosophical Investigations* are concerned with the impossibility of having a 'private language', of giving meaning to words outside a public, social,

context. Even thinking without a public language is ruled out. Marx makes a similar point:

> Language is as old as consciousness, language *is* practical consciousness that exists also for other men and for that reason alone it really exists for me personally as well.[14]

Compare:

> . . . (the individual) has language as *his own* only as a natural member of a human community. Language as the product of a single person is senseless (*ist ein unding*).[15]

Talking in terms of language helps to demystify the abstract 'thought'. There are other such abstracts which equally have a social origin and which at times have seemed to have a transcendental existence, such as money and 'value' in all its forms.

To the individual all of these appear as facts, whose 'meanings' he learns in the course of his education and which he can do little to alter. Hence it is natural to regard them as similar to material objects in respect of permanence and fixity. They are clearly not material, so the solution is to look upon them as enjoying a transcendental existence in some different realm. But the appearance of permanence is an illusion arising from ignorance of their history. They are all in some sense human creations, though not, as in the case of the work of individuals, the result of conscious planning. The remedy for the illusion is to study how they came to be as they are, which may also give hints as to how they might be changed. Universities frequently think of themselves as the guardians of culture and consequently are particularly prone to concentrate on the fixity of language and of value. In such circumstances it is easier for language to 'go on holiday' than in the world of action, where words are more obviously tools and hence liable to change with changes in circumstances.

Although Wittgenstein wished to get rid of the 'sickness of philosophical problems', he never suggested that there was any possibility of permanently keeping language on the job, of stopping it idling. All he sought to do was to make people conscious of the danger, not to provide a permanent remedy. Marx's criticism of such a position was:

> The alteration of consciousness divorced from actual conditions—which philosophers pursue as a profession, i.e. as a *trade*—is itself a product of existing conditions and inseparable from them.[16]

Marx wants to show how ideas have become separated from reality and

so taken on a life of their own, and hence to be in a position to remedy this error. His solution (or dissolution) is to change society so that there would be no room for language to idle, no possibility of false consciousness arising, no tendency to 'reify' words, concepts or other social products. There are many problems with such a view: all I can say here is that I suspect that the 'fit' between language and the world can never be so tight that philosophical problems cannot occur. In a different social order they may appear to be different problems, but I suspect they will have the same fundamental character. It is not so easy to bring philosophy to an end.

Wittgenstein did not believe in the possibility of a planned change in society; for him 'forms of life' were given facts, not to be criticised from the outside by the philosopher. If a society had a peculiar religion all that could be said was that 'This is how things are amongst them'. He did not deny that changes took place, only that they could be consciously initiated; at least this I take to be the sense of a puzzling passage:

> The sickness of a time is cured by an alteration in the mode of life of human beings, and it was possible for the sickness of philosophical problems to get cured only through a changed mode of thought and life, not through a medicine invented by an individual.
>
> Suppose the use of the motor-car produces or encourages certain illnesses, and mankind is plagued by such illness until, from some cause or other, as the result of some development or other, it abandons the habit of driving.[17]

I take it Marx would have replied:

> The real, practical dissolution of these phrases, the removal of these notions from the consciousness of men, will, as we have already said, be effected by altered circumstances, not by theoretical discussions.[18]

Marx believed that men acting together could consciously alter their circumstances.

The two programmes for the end of philosophy thus themselves give rise to a further philosophical problem, that of deciding between them. If it is true that only philosophical methods can bring philosophy to an end, then we are left with ample material on which to work and my audience need not fear the imminent demise of the subject.

In conclusion I will only say that I have criticised Marx for being general where he should have worked in detail; I am all too conscious that I have done the same, provided a programme for a piece of work rather than doing it. But I am suspicious of detailed philosophical

investigation unless informed with some overall conception of the subject. Finally, a professor is surely entitled to be programmatic and provocative in an inaugural lecture if anywhere.

REFERENCES

1 Op. cit. 6.53
2 *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus*, London, 1961, 5.5563. ('Everyday language' here includes the complex propositions of scientists.)
3 *ibid.* 6.54 and 7.
4 *German Ideology*, London, 1965, p. 38.
5 *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford, 1953, §133.
6 *German Ideology*, p. 255.
7 *Philosophical Investigations*, §109.
8 Keith Thomas: *Religion and the decline of Magic*, London, 1971, p. 248.
9 *German Ideology*, p. 254.
10 *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, quoted Bottomore: *Karl Marx*, London, 1956, pp. 26–7.
11 *German Ideology*, p. 399.
12 *German Ideology*, p. 491.
13 cf. *German Ideology*, p. 495.
14 *German Ideology*, pp. 41–2.
15 *Grundrisse*, Dietz Verlag, 1953, p. 6.
16 *German Ideology*, p. 414.
17 *Remarks on the Foundation of Mathematics*, Oxford, 1956, p. 57.
18 *German Ideology*, p. 52.